

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 001714

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/09/2014

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GR](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: THE PLIGHT OF TURKS IN WESTERN THRACE: RED HERRING
OR POLITICAL COVER?

REF: A. ISTANBUL 1511

[1](#)B. ISTANBUL 1575
[1](#)C. ANKARA 6229

Classified By: Consul General David Arnett for Reasons 1.5 (b&d)

[1](#)1. (sbu) Summary: There is a solid strain of Turkish opinion promoting the idea of "reciprocity" re dealing with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Increasingly, opinion makers and the GOT attempt to justify the current situation by citing the "mistreatment" of Turks living in Greece. The Association for the Solidarity of Turks of Western Thrace disavows any animosity towards the small Greek community in Istanbul, but claims that Greece continues to: repress Turkish efforts to assert their ethnic identity, restrict their freedom to choose religious leaders, and provide inadequate Turkish-language educational facilities. Although linking the treatment of the two minorities has no valid legal basis, doing so resonates with wider public opinion. End Summary.

Turks of Western Thrace -- Red Herring?...

[1](#)2. (sbu) Meeting with poloff in early October, board members of the Association for the Solidarity of Turks of Western Thrace (ASTWT) outlined their positions and sought to justify a "siege" of the Patriarchate they carried out as far back as [1](#)1991. Founded in 1946 by Turks from western Thrace, ASTWT now has 15,000 registered members at branches in 15 cities in Turkey. ASTWT uses its charitable foundations, sports clubs, and community centers to reach out to 64,000 Turks from western Thrace and their families. ASTWT President Burhaneddin Hakguder disavowed all terrorism and violence, describing the 1991 "siege" of the Patriarchate as a peaceful demonstration that sought to draw attention to the Greek government's decision, for the first time, to reject the popular election of a muftu by a Turkish community in western Thrace (Note: Metropolitan Meliton, Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, told poloff that he was in the building at the time and that it had certainly "felt" like a near-violent siege). The Greek government continues to deny approval of elected muftus and insists on appointing its own.

[1](#)3. (sbu) Denying any animosity towards the Patriarch or Greek community here, ASTWT board members argued they are the victims of a "double-standard." According to them, the Greek government has systematically sought to eliminate any sense of ethnic identity among its Turkish population. Until passage of a new citizenship law in 2000, permission to open businesses and even obtain certain driving licenses was denied. Courts continue to reject applications for organizations with the word "Turk" in the name; one judge even argued that "there are no Turks" in Greece. Turkish schools are deliberately under-funded and under-staffed to the point where responsible parents feel compelled to send their children to Greek schools. One board member claimed that his niece's textbook at one such school still claims, for example, that "some day" man will reach the moon. Greece refuses to lift restrictions on the number of Turkish instructors who can come to Greece (currently capped at 15; there are well over 200 Turkish schools). Finally, Hakguder claimed that until Greece was forced to revise its laws in 1989, over 60,000 Turks were stripped of their Greek citizenship, often simply for leaving the country. To this day those former Greek citizens have no recourse to appeal the decisions.

... Or Political Cover?

[1](#)4. (c) While condemning violent measures employed by some radical groups that have perpetrated attacks against the Patriarchate in the past, a wide range of Turkish academics, journalists, bureaucrats, and politicians routinely opposes any reforms or measures to address outstanding concerns of the minority religious communities on the grounds that Greece must also cease any such discrimination against its Turkish population. The Istanbul Muftu, Mustafa Cagrici, made this argument at a conference on minority issues earlier this year. The Acting Director for the Istanbul General Directorate for Foundations also made the same argument in meetings with poloffs. Columnists, including former Motherland party Education Minister Hasan Celal Guzel, retired Ambassador and True Path parliamentarian Coskun

Kirca, and former Democratic Left parliamentarian Ahmet Tan, among others, have all made the same connection in newspaper columns. Most recently, Education Minister Celik also told the Ambassador there is a link between the treatment western Thrace's Turks and the search for a solution to permit the reopening of the Greek Orthodox seminary on Heybeli Island (Halki)(ref c).

15. (sbu) This linkage of the Greek minority's position in Turkey with the plight of Turks in Greece is based on a debatable legal interpretation of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which brought an end to the Turkish war of independence and established the Turkish Republic's modern borders. Section III of the Treaty on the Protection of Minorities obligated Turkey to ensure freedom of religion and equal political and civil rights for all of its nationals. Article 45 at the end of Section III states that, "The rights conferred by the provisions of the present Section on the non-Moslem minorities of Turkey will be similarly conferred by Greece on the Moslem minority in her territory."

16. (sbu) Legal interpretations aside, linking the treatment of the two minority populations resonates with a broad cross-section of Turkish public opinion. The perception here that Greece continues to discriminate against its Muslim population has become a de facto obstacle in the resolution of outstanding religious freedom issues in Turkey. Many Turks continue to cite the same grievances listed by the ASTWT above, including the right of Turks in Greece to appoint their own muftus, inadequate funding of Turkish schools, and a general desire to suppress any sense of ethnic identity among the population there. Greece's failure to construct a mosque in Athens before this year's Summer Olympic Games, despite its commitments to do so, was regularly cited earlier this year as further proof of its recalcitrant attitude on this issue. Turkish newspapers also recently gave prominent coverage to a November incident in which a Greek television crew filmed an "inappropriately"-dressed woman in a mosque used by Turks living in Greece (Note: They also reported that Greek prosecutors had launched an investigation).

17. (c) Comment: Although we make every effort to convince Turks that linking the problems of the two minorities is counterproductive, it is an argument that appears to have solid traction among a large number of Turks here in Istanbul. Treatment of Turks in Greece is an issue that we leave for Embassy Athens to address, but we assure our interlocutors that our Mission in Greece is every bit as diligent as we are in investigating and raising human rights violations. For better or worse, however, the issue has become a de facto obstacle for progress on Halki and other issues relating to the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

SMITH